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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study conducted to assess differences among African American adolescents based on skin tone. It was hypothesized that the students would demonstrate differences in self-esteem, ethnic identity, and cross-cultural coping strategies based on their skin tones. One hundred thirteen African American adolescents completed research packets. Results of ANOVA (analysis of variance) do not indicate any differences among the students in self-esteem, ethnic identity, or cross-cultural interaction behaviors; however, there are significant correlations between self-esteem and ethnic identity as well as between self-esteem and cross-cultural interaction behaviors. Results suggest that school and community counselors and psychologists who work with African American adolescents should note the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity. Counselors and psychologists working in highly culturally diverse environments should help students learn to use multiple methods of cross-cultural interactions to increase their self-esteem. Limitations of the study are examined. Implications for counseling and education are discussed. (Contains 2 tables and 17 references.) (MKA)

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Running head: SKIN TONE AND OUTCOMES

Differences Among African American Jr. High School Students: The Effects of Skin Tone on Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem and Cross-Cultural Behavior

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Differences Among African American Jr. High School Students: The Effects of Skin Tone on Ethnic Identity, Self Esteem and Cross-Cultural Behavior

Abstract

This article explains the results of a study conducted to assess differences among African American adolescents' based on skin tone. It was hypothesized that the students would demonstrate differences in self-esteem, ethnic identity and cross-cultural coping strategies based on their skin tones. 113 African American adolescents completed research packets. Results of ANOVA did not determine any differences among the students on self-esteem, ethnic identity, or cross cultural interaction behaviors. However, significant correlations were found between self-esteem and ethnic identity and self esteem and cross cultural interaction behaviors. Implications for counseling and education are discussed.

Differences Among African American Jr. High School Students: The Effects of Skin Tone on Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem and Cross-Cultural Behavior

Color consciousness is a phenomenon that exists within the African American community. It is defined as a process in which African Americans, "differentially attend and respond to shades of Black skin" (Bond & Cash, 1992 p. 875; Breland, 1998; Neal and Wilson, 1989). In 1998, Breland proposed that this phenomenon was one in need of study such that researchers might determine its causes and effects. Specifically, she wrote that, "research demonstrating the relationship between skin tone bias and self-esteem… might be quite beneficial in understanding this phenomenon. Given the... discussion regarding color consciousness and African American racial identity, it may be important for researchers to study the relationship between the two for either correlation or causality" (p. 308). Further, Breland suggested that future research, "might also empirically document the prevalence of color consciousness among African Americans by determining if skin tone itself is a status characteristic among African Americans" (p. 308). The following study is presented to address skin tone as a status characteristic.

Introduction

At present, there are very few studies that address differential psychological, educational, and professional outcomes among African Americans. Of those that have been conducted, strong evidence has been found to support the notion of skin tone as a mediating variable in differential outcomes among African Americans. In 1990, Hughes and Hertel completed an analysis of one national survey of African Americans. By using data from the 1980 Survey of Black Americans (a probability household survey of 2,107 African Americans aged 18 and older), they concluded that, African Americans with lighter skin have greater education,

occupational prestige, personal income and family income than their darker skinned peers. Further, by controlling for variables such as age, sex, and parental socioeconomic status, they found that these differences were not due to the historical prevalence of lighter skinned African Americans in the higher socioeconomic stratum. Keith & Herring (1991) analyzed data from the same survey and found that skin tone has a direct effect on personal and family income, educational attainment, and occupation. Hunter (1998) and Hall (1996) each derived findings similar to that of the aforementioned authors. Specifically, Hunter discovered that lighter skinned African American women had, "higher educational attainment, higher personal incomes, and [were] more likely to marry higher status husbands [sic]" (p. 517). Similarly, Hall found that lighter skinned African Americans aspired to more prestigious occupations than darker skinned African Americans did. As disturbing as these trends may seem, there is little evidence offered to refute their findings. As such, it is becoming more and more evident that skin tone may indeed be a status characteristic for African Americans.

Self-Esteem, Ethnic Identity, and Cross-Cultural Interaction Behaviors

The primary goal of this study was to determine if there are differences in the life experiences of African Americans based on skin tone. Previous research in this area has included, but not necessarily focused on, self-esteem and ethnic identity. It has been hypothesized that since African Americans may be treated differently based on skin tone, they may have internalized views that would reflect this differential treatment. Breland (1998), Coard (1997), Neal and Wilson (1989), and Okazawa-Rey, Robinson and Ward (1986) have all speculated, based on clinical examples and research, that there may indeed be a link between skin tone and self esteem and/or self concept. In fact, Okazawa-Rey, makes a very strong point about African American women that is likely applicable across genders. She writes, "A woman's

self-concept develops in pa t from observing and internalizing what others think about her. Consequently, the attributes society assigns to the attractive and unattractive black female have profound implications for her psychosocial development" (p.13). Similarly, researchers have speculated on the link between skin tone and ethnic identity. Hughes and Hertel (1990), researched the effects of skin color on 3 aspects of "black consciousness", namely black identity, black separatism and racial self-esteem. They found, "weak but significant zero-order relationships with skin color, indicating that black identity and black separatism are more evident among those with darker skin. (p. 1110)" In another study by Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (1998), it is reported that lighter skinned African Americans are consistently more likely to occupy the higher rungs of the "power elite" or high ranking officials in business and government. With regard to the relationship between ethnic identity and skin tone, they quote a prominent African American military officer as stating that a primary reason for his acceptance among whites is that he is not "that Black" because he speaks well and is comfortable in white situations (p. 112). The authors believe that each of these examples speaks to the relationship between skin tone and self-esteem and skin tone and ethnic identity.

Little has been done to ascertain the role that skin tone plays on cross-cultural interactions. This may primarily be due to the fact that little has been done to ascertain the role of skin tone on African Americans' lives in general. Further, the concept of cross-cultural interactions is a fairly new area of research with limited empirical studies. As such, one might question the purpose of including this variable in the present study. To answer that question, the authors suggest the following. Coleman, Wampold and Casali, (1996), hypothesize that cross - cultural interactions encompass 6 general categories, assimilation, acculturation, fusion, separation, integration and alternation (See Coleman, Wampold and Casali, 1996 for an in depth

review of these categories). Coleman has suggested that the although there are 6 proposed strategies for use in dealing with cultural diversity, when measured, there appear to be four distinct strategies, acculturation, alternation, integration, and separation. This is because of the high correlation between the fusion and integration strategies and the assimilation and acculturation strategies, which may mean that these constructs are not distinct. The authors suggest that skin tone may be a mediating variable in determining the number of methods of cross-cultural interaction available to an African American. Consider for example the aforementioned research of Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1998. If, as they state in their research, European Americans are more comfortable with lighter skinned African Americans because they look more like them, then it may possible that lighter skinned African Americans have more interaction behaviors at their disposal than darker skinned African Americans. The rationale here is that lighter skinned African Americans may be more likely put in a position to interact regularly with European Americans in a cross cultural context than darker skinned African Americans because of their access to education and high socioeconomic status. Therefore, we have included this variable in the present study, to test this assumption.

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between skin tone and psychological variables among African Americans who differ by skin tone. It is hypothesized that there will be differences in ethnic identity, self-esteem and cross cultural interaction behaviors for the African American adolescent participants of the study.

Methods

Participants

There were 113 participants in this study. The participants were adolescents, 7th (44.2%, n= 50) and 8th (55.8%, n=63) grade students, in a medium sized predominantly white southeastern school system. 51.3% (n=58) of the participants

were males and 48.7% (n=55) females. Letters informing parents about the study and seeking consent for participation were sent to the participants' homes. Of the students whose parents were informed of the study, 201 offered consent. Of the 201 students who were allowed to participate in the study, 33 failed to answer the question specifying their skin tone and 55 were either European American or biracial and did not meet selection criteria for this study. Participants completed packets in their classrooms with oversight by research assistants and their teachers. Participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines for human subjects as well as the ethical guidelines for working with diverse populations.

Measures

The measures used in this study included the Multi-Construct African American Identity Questionnaire (MCAIQ) (Smith, 1996), Coping with Cultural Diversity Scale (CCDS) (Coleman, Casali, & Wampold, 1996), The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1965) and the Breland Skin Tone and Perceptions Tool (STPT) (Breland, 1996).

The Multi-Construct African American Identity Questionnaire (MCAIQ) (Smith and Brookins, 1997). This test was designed to, "measure several proposed components of racial/ethnic identity in African American adolescents" (Smith and Brookins, 1997, p. 1). The test consists of 25 items used to measure socialization preferences; appearance preferences, attitudes regarding stereotypes of African Americans; and cooperative values. Subjects were asked to rate each item on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 representing strong agreement and 1 representing strong disagreement. Measures were scored by adding the numerical values of all answers to obtain scores between 25 and 125. According to the test developers, "higher scores on the MCAIQ are received by participants who responded to items endorsing in group orientations, rejecting group stereotypes; accepting positive portrayals of

African Americans as a group; and espousing cooperative values" (Smith and Brookins, 1997, p. 5). Internal reliability estimates for the measure and its subscales were found to have Cronbach alphas ranging from .54 - .87. This measure was used to test the previously demonstrated assumption that African American adolescents differ in their ethnic identity strength based on skin tone.

The Coping with Cultural Diversity Scale (CCDS) (Coleman, Casali, & Wampold, 1996) is a 54 item scale that seeks to measure how likely an adolescent is to use four strategies for coping with cultural diversity hypothesized by Coleman et al (1996). In the 4-subscale version, these strategies are acculturation, alternation, integration, and separation. Currently, the scale is in the initial stages of construct validation, however previous studies have found reliability estimates using Cronbach's alpha of between .73, in this study, and .90 (Coleman, 1996). Further, the sample on which Coleman et als' data is based was 10.2% African American. This measure was used to test the assumption that skin tone might affect the number of strategies used an African American for engaging in cross-cultural interactions.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is a 10-item scale that is used to assess self-acceptance aspects of self-esteem. Each item allows participants to provide an answer in the range of 1 to 4 with 1 representing strong disagreement and 4 representing strong agreement. "One point is scored for each item answered in the keyed direction, yielding a range from 0 (lowest self-esteem) to 40 (highest self esteem)" (Westaway & Wolmarans, 1992). A previous study of this measure with African Americans provided a high reliability estimate with Cronbach's alpha of .82 (Wade, 1996). This measure was used to test the assumption that self -esteem differs for African Americans based on their skin tones.

Finally, the author administered the Breland Skin Tone and Perceptions Scale (STPT) (Breland, 1996). This is a scale designed by the author specifically for the

purpose of this study. It is a short 12 item measure developed to determine participants' identification of their own skin tones and the degree to which they judge other African Americans, either positively or negatively, based on skin tone. This scale was developed as previous measures used to assess the same phenomenon presented more variables than were appropriate for this study and because no similar measures were available at the time of data collection. The experimental scale consists of 12 pictures of African American adolescents who vary according to skin tone. Participants are asked to select the picture of the adolescent who best fits (in their opinion) the answer to each of 12 questions. Questions 1-11 were related to aspects of social and academic ability. Question 12 on the scale was used to determine the participants' perceptions of their own skin color. The stimulus pictures were selected based on the ratings of 5 trained raters who rated the pictures first solely on level of attractiveness (i.e. attractive or unattractive). This was done by adjusting the skin tones of all stimulus pictures to the same medium skin tone. Only those pictures for which an inter-rater reliability of .50 was obtained were used. After raters grouped the pictures according to level of attractiveness, pictures were then altered to their original skin tone and grouped by skin tone (i.e. one category each for light, medium, and dark skin) with both genders represented. Again only those pictures for which an inter-rater reliability of .50 was obtained were used.

The measure is scored on a continuum from a possible score of 1 to 11. Subjects were given 1 point for each time they associated a dark skinned person with a negative trait or a light skinned person with a positive trait and they earned 0 points for each time they associated a light skinned person with a negative trait or a dark skinned person with a positive trait. Subjects received 0 points for associating medium skinned persons with any traits. Higher scores indicate general skin tone bias. Reliability estimates for this scoring procedure yielded a score of .62 for raw

variables and .55 for standardized variables. As stated earlier, the measure was also used to place participants into light, medium and dark skin tone groups. Specifically, those students who selected a light skinned person as the person they most resembled were placed in the light group; those who selected a person in the middle were placed in the middle skin tone group and those who selected a dark skinned person were placed in the dark skinned group.

Data Analysis

Results

Participants were categorized as either light, medium or dark skinned according to their responses on the STPT. 32.7% (n=37) considered themselves to be light skinned; 51.3% (n=58) considered themselves to be of medium skin tone, and 15.9% (n=18) considered themselves to be dark skinned. All other means, ranges, and standard deviations for the dependent variables are listed in table 1. A one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was performed to test the effects of skin tone on ethnic identity, self esteem and cross cultural behavior use. No significant differences were found between the skin tone groups on these variables. Table 2 presents the Pearson product correlations for the variables under study. Positive and significant ($p < .05$) relationships were found to exist between cross cultural behavior use and self-esteem $r = .22$ and ethnic identity and self-esteem $r = .19$.

Discussion

Regarding the main hypothesis that African Americans would differ on various psychological variables by skin tone, such was not found to be the case. This finding is in stark contrast to previous research where ethnic identity and self-esteem were found to be significantly related to skin tone. It is possible that the developmental age of the participants (13 - 15) contributed to the convergence of

scores for self-esteem, which in this case was quite low. Whaley (1993) offers support for this assumption. In his research, he proposed that children in the stage of adolescent development are experiencing a general decrease in self-esteem as a result of the transition they experience in moving from elementary to junior high. This notion is particularly relevant for the participants of this study, half of whom were 7th graders. Regarding the skin tone independent variable and its effects on the dependent variables, it is possible that some difficulty lies in attempting to ascertain African Americans true skin tones via self-report. Because the researchers did not make judgments about the participants' skin tones, there was no means for checking the accuracy of self-ratings either via comparison or via inter-rater reliability estimates. Therefore it is possible that the participants did not demarcate themselves appropriately into their true skin tone groups which would affect outcomes on all variables studied. Considering the relatively low numbers of participants who rated themselves as dark skinned (n=18), it is possible that previous findings regarding the low status attributed to dark skin might preclude an easily influenced adolescent from categorizing him or herself as such. Therefore, we would find a preponderance of participants in the medium and light categories (as was the case in this study) both of which carry either neutral or positive connotations. Finally, the literature has demonstrated that skin tone among African Americans is a very difficult subject to address (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1998) and since the skin tone portion of this study was not concealed, it is possible that scores on the measures reflect socially desirable answers and not true feelings.

As stated earlier, weak, yet significant relationships were found to exist between self-esteem, ethnic identity and cross-cultural behavior use. It seems reasonable to expect that a person with higher self-esteem would have a stronger ethnic identity, given that ethnic identity is one aspect of global self-concept. Prior

research in the area of ethnic identity and self-esteem has demonstrated a strong relationship between the two. Phinney (1989) and Phinney and Alipuria (1990) found that, " self-esteem was related to ethnic identity" (Phinney, 1992, p.171). Further, Smith and Brookins (1997) and Wade (1996) found a similar relationship between the two constructs and speculated that an African American with strong ethnic identity might be less likely to acknowledge the negative stereotypes put forth about African Americans, hence enhancing and confirming a high self-worth. Although the present findings are not as strong, they do seem to support this trend. Self-esteem was also found to be related to cross cultural interactions. Coleman (1996), asserts that there are between 4 and 6 strategies for use in managing cross-cultural interactions. For the purposes of this study, the researchers focused on acculturation, alternation, integration, and separation. If we consider the fact that each of these strategies requires some skill to be successful, then it seems reasonable to expect that a person with higher self-esteem would feel more competent and skilled in using more of the strategies. Further, based on the aforementioned literature, it is possible to speculate that a person who holds him or herself in high regard, may be more likely to attract others to him or her than someone with lower self-regard. Note Whaley's (1993) culture specific reference to the work of Susan Harter. He suggests that for African American children, self-esteem is related to the child's perception of his or her level of competence in areas that are important to him or her. As such, it is probable that the child who feels more competent in engaging in cross-cultural behaviors would derive some sense of his or her higher self-esteem from being able to use different strategies. Conversely, an adolescent with more trouble in and fewer opportunities for practicing the use of the cross-cultural interaction skills might have lower self-esteem.

Conclusions and Limitations

Two major conclusions can be drawn from this study. School and community counselors and psychologists who work with African American adolescents should note the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity. It is possible that by encouraging African American adolescents to take pride in their ethnic heritage, we might also boost self-esteem. Further, given the relationship between self-esteem and cross cultural interactions, it seems important for those counselors and psychologists working in highly culturally diverse environments to help students develop skill in utilizing multiple methods of cross cultural interaction so that they might derive higher self-esteem. Both suggestions seem quite important to the psychosocial development of African American adolescents.

The results of this study regarding skin tone might lead one to believe that the prior literature focused on examining intra-group differences among African Americans is no longer necessary or relevant. Although the findings of this study did not corroborate previous findings, this area is still one in which further research should be conducted. It is possible that the limitations of this study, including the small sample size and the large number of participants who elected not to categorize themselves based on their skin tones (33%, n= 32), may have contributed to the lack of support for the main hypothesis. It is further possible that use of the STPT may be partially to blame for the lack of corroboration for the main hypothesis. The novelty of the measure, coupled with the fact that it was developed specifically for use in this study is a consideration. The stimulus objects in the pictures were not dressed in a uniform manner and therefore may have influenced participants via style of dress. In addition, there may be differences in perceptions of skin tone and level of attractiveness between the adults (who acted as raters to select the pictures) and adolescents (who served as participants). Finally, it is possible that the developmental age of the participants, with a very strong focus on the self, may have

precluded them from being able to view an unfamiliar adolescent as resembling them in any fashion. Future research might want to address the manners in which data on the categorization of African Americans by skin tone is collected. It is hoped that each of these limitations will be addressed in future research.

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Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations on All Variables

Variables	M	SD	N
Ethnic Identity	70.02	8.36	113
Bicultural Coping Strategy Use	167.59	41.35	113
Self Esteem	26.51	3.09	113

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients

	ccdstot	mcaiqtot	rsestot	selfgrp
ccdstot	1.0	.15	.22*	.03
mcaiqtot		1.00	.19*	-.14
rsestot			1.00	-.13
selfgrp				1.00

(* = significant at $p < .05$)
KEY: (MCAIQ) ethnic identity, (CCDS) cross cultural behavior use, (RSES) self-esteem, and (SELFGRP) self-rated skin tone.